

The role of intellectual and emotional development in product choice: A case for adolescents?

MSRA Conference paper

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Abstract

This study sought to establish differences in consumption behaviour between adolescents (age 12 – 19) and young adults (age 20 – 30) in selected commercial product categories. This was based on a theoretical rationale that intellectual and emotional differences play a big role in favour of young adults, who are more mature and stable in choice decisions, as compared to adolescents.

The study was conducted among a sample of 300 randomly selected respondents that was divided equally into adolescents and young adults.

The study found out that young adults displayed higher scores than adolescents in consumption behaviour in all selected categories. The study concluded that intellectual and emotional development played a big role in choice of products.

Since adolescents look at themselves as ‘almost there’ in relation attaining adult status, the researcher recommended the use of more effective product campaigns targeted to young adults, because there will have a trickle effect to the adolescents.

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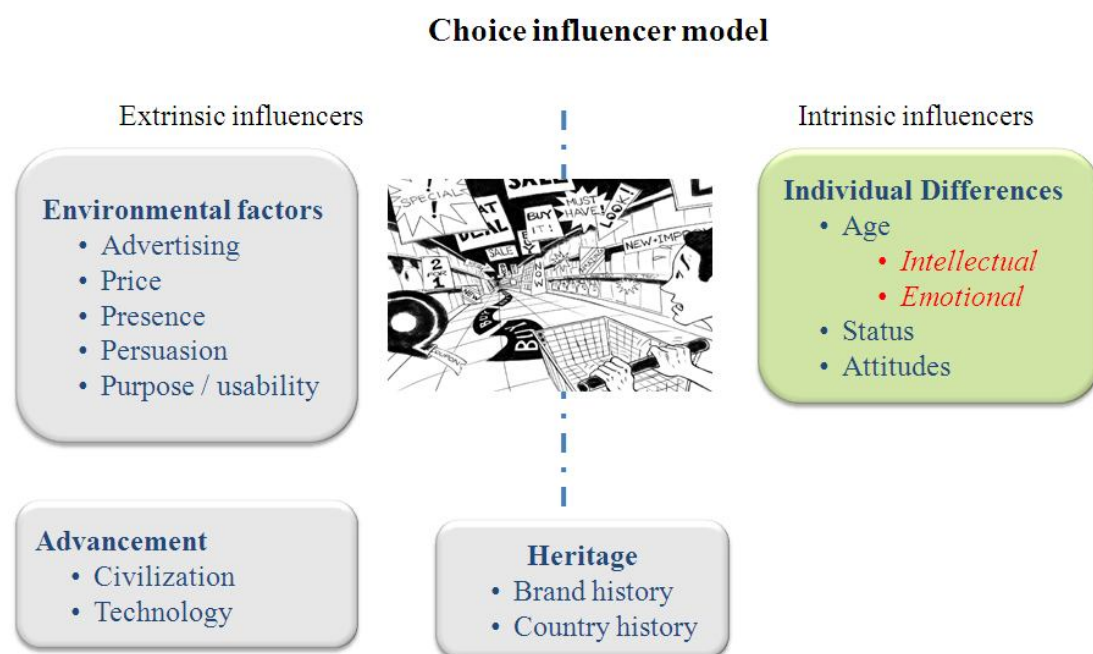
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Chapter one: Introduction

1.1. Background

What really influences the choice of brands for a consumer? The well known consumer disposition funnel supposes it all starts from awareness. Other recent models such as Synovate's Brand Value Creator (BVC) advocate the role of barriers at the point of making a decision. A brand choice model is demonstrated in the figure below.

Figure 1: Influencer model



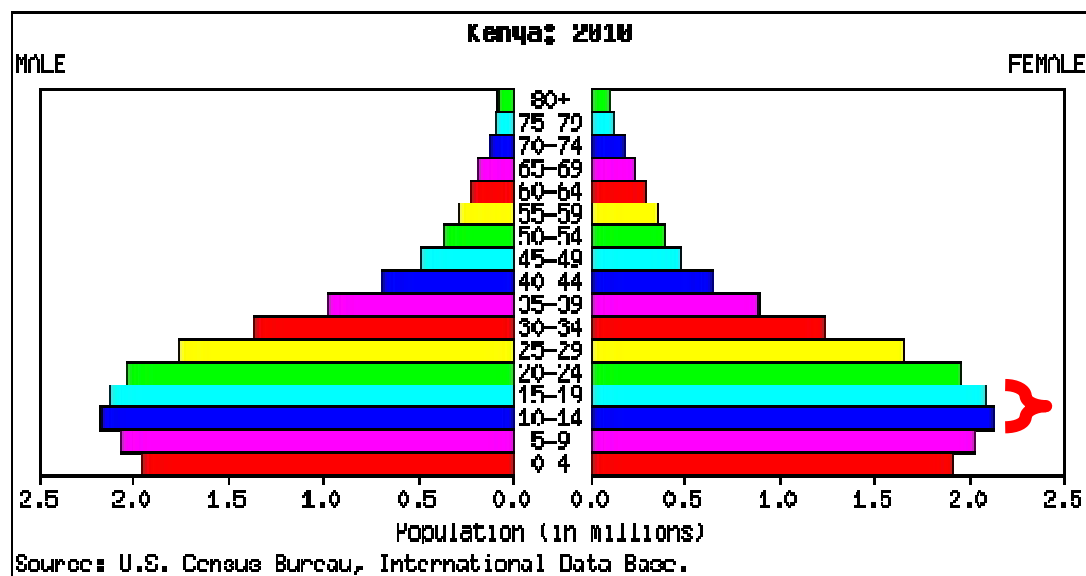
Consumers' age and attitudinal predisposition have always been used in brand choice analysis, but rarely do we see underlying constructs such as differences due to

intellectual and emotional development of consumers, which are largely determined by age, being cited in this arena.

There is widespread emphasis on the young consumer. The adolescence years (12 – 19) seem to have evoked an insatiable interest from marketers, who would go any length, not only to recruit, but maintain this chunk of the market.

Available population statistics prove that this is really a huge chunk of the market – as seen in the chart below:

Figure 2: Kenya population Distribution



Published literature cited by marketers endeavour to prove that adolescents are different. They are seen as trend-setters. Their influence is said to be felt deep inside the kitchen, bathroom, bookshop, the local beverage kiosk, and even in the sitting room when watching news over the television! But these people are in school, they don't work. Yet, they are said to push billions in to the economies.

Corporates, both large and small have championed youthful brands, and others are investing their fortunes to rebrand flagship brands as youthful to attract this segment of the market.

But how different are the adolescents? What implications play due to their stages of intellectual and emotional development? Do they possess any unique characteristics that marketers may miss out if they target young adults (aged 20 – 30 years)? Are marketing efforts among adolescents a contravention of the models of psychological explanations for intellectual and emotional development during this age?

This researcher sought to test propositions based on the above questions, with an aim of justifying or demystifying adolescent ‘hying’.

1.2. Objectives of this study

This study sought to establish differences in consumption behaviour between adolescents (age 12 – 19) and young adults (age 20 – 30) in selected commercial product categories, which are:

- Media
- Clothing and personal accessories
- Food snacks
- Non-alcoholic beverages
- Technology

These product categories were preferred because literature supported the effect of intellectual and emotional differences in their consumption

1.3. Rationale

The researcher deemed it important to investigate adolescents and youth adults because of their significant numbers and hence potential to any marketer.

According to the African Union Commission (2010)¹, numerically the adolescents and young adults form a large part of Sub Saharan Africa's population (estimated at 34.3% in 2007). Further, the young people of today are the best educated in human history, have greater degree of mobility, versatility, dynamism and adaptability and the gender equation is more balanced among them. They are also known to be more creative and innovative than adult populations, and are taking the lead in several areas of development. A study to understand their consumption behaviour as a result of their intellectual and emotional development is important in informing strategic marketing decisions.

1.4. Theoretical rationale: Adolescents Intellectual Development

What lies at the core of adolescent intellectual development is the attainment of a more fully conscious, self-directed and self-regulating mind. Casey, B.J. et al. (2000) point out that this is achieved principally through the assembly of an advanced 'executive suite' of capabilities, as a result of rapid brain development.

¹¹ African Union Commission (2010). Africa's youth are major drivers in bid to attain African Union vision

According to Spear (2000), significant growth and significant change in multiple regions of the prefrontal cortex throughout the years of adolescence, are believed to underlie improvements in various aspects of executive functioning, including long-term planning, self-evaluation, self-regulation and the coordination of affect and cognition.

As adolescents mature, their thinking becomes more sophisticated towards adult-like in many respects. However, as they become more introspective, they often go through periods of extreme self absorption which Cauffman & Steinberg (2000) calls "adolescent egocentrism." This phenomenon results in the adolescent focusing on themselves to the point they exclude others. Adolescent egocentrism has the following five case scenarios:

- **Imaginary audience:** This is a notion that one is occupying a centre stage, and others are paying attention to 'me' as 'I am to myself'. Here, one is able to take into account the thoughts of others, though they fail to distinguish personal concern with reactions of those around them. A classic example is an adolescent who puts on a skinny jeans trouser with a notion that *"everyone will notice me..."*
- **Personal fable:** This is an inflated opinion of importance. It revolves around the adolescent's erroneous belief that his or her experiences, perspectives and values are unique and specific only to him or her, and that these factors will lead them to fame, fortune, honor, glory or great accomplishments. When an adolescent tells you *"...you can possibly understand how I feel..."*, is a clear manifestation of personal fable.

- **Invincibility fable:** Adolescents believe they are invincible and can never be hurt. Not that they don't understand the consequences; they simply believe they'll be an exception! A critical look at some of the snacks and foods that appeal to adolescents leaves much to be desired considering the increasing incidence of type 2 Diabetic among adolescents... because they believe it can't happen to them
- **Pseudo-stupidity:** At a first glance, adolescent's behaviour appears incredibly stupid. However, a closer look reveals that teens can get lost in 'all possibilities' and miss the obvious (Elkind, 1998). This seems to play out when adolescents spend all their money on snacks.

Adolescents tend to overestimate the degree to which their behaviour will lead to social acceptance or social rejection. This kind of thinking makes the adolescent more vulnerable to peer pressure – and we know many purchase decisions are due to this pressure.

As they outgrow adolescence, young adults become less susceptible to parental influence, and even less to peers. As they mature, they develop a greater sense of autonomy and self-sufficiency which allow them to establish more independent decisions about products and brands they want to use. They frequently question previously adopted brands in the family before arriving at their own personal set of principles which govern their preferences. The fact that young adults have more earnings than adolescents strengthen their choice of brands.

1.5. Adolescent's emotional development

The tactics of emotional branding have evolved over time as consumers have become more sophisticated, but the underlying principle remains true: We're emotional beings, and we respond to emotional appeals. That said, adolescence is by far the most turbulent emotional period in the life of an individual. This is a transition period, when one is neither a child nor a fully grown adult. Adolescents demand a measure of freedom; they want to be treated like adults even though they have not yet developed mental and emotional maturity like adults. Sometimes they seek security in peer groups and identify with the members in dress and behaviour. Conversations become monosyllabic. Weird dressing becomes fashionable. Yet, there is consolation that Teenage behaviour is merely a passing phase, a milestone on the road to maturity

Kuther (2000) asserts that the impact of puberty on arousal and motivation occurs before the maturation of the frontal lobes of the brain is complete, showing the effect of hormones more than cognitive processes. This gap creates a period of heightened vulnerability to problems in the regulation of affect and behaviour, which might help to explain the increased potential in adolescence for risk-taking, recklessness, and the onset of emotional instability.

According to Wainryb (2001), there is evidence that pubertal development directly influence the development of romantic interest and sexual motivation. A study by Joseph (2003) provides a supporting a link between increasing levels of reproductive hormones and sensitivity to social status, which is consistent with the

link between puberty and ‘status brands’, From all these works cited, it appears that there are important links between pubertal maturation and emotional information-processing.

Because many of the emotional changes take place very fast, the adolescent finds him/herself suffering from periods of heightened anxiety, mood swings and irritability.

As put by Slovic (2000), in real-life situations, adolescents do not rationally weigh the relative risks and consequences of their behaviour – their actions are largely influenced by feelings and social influence. They would love a brand today, and hate it tomorrow, and this makes them poor brand ambassadors.

Unlike them young adults are more advanced in their emotional maturity, and adopt brands with a purpose. They develop stronger attachments with brands, have more purchasing power, and can handle emotional outbursts.

1.6. Chapter summary

The theoretical discourse above alludes that contrary to common believe, adolescents are at the mercies of their intellectual and emotional development, and therefore unable to make stable decisions. This position may affect their reliance as trend setters and brand ambassadors at the expense of young adults.

Chapter Two: Overview of Methodology

2.1. Introduction

This chapter gives a brief overview of the methodology used to collect the study data

2.2. Target population and sampling design

This study targetted respondents aged 12 – 30 yrs in Nairobi, which is not only the nerve of all marketing activities in Kenya, but also the city with the highest diversity in terms of poplulation and civilization, hence the trend setter. For purposes of classification, the sample was split into two: adolescents (12 – 19) and young adults (20 – 30yrs). Adolescents sample was obtained from randomly selected co-educational institutions with a balanced representation of both boys and girls. The adults were randomly selected through a kish-grid in residential areas.

A total of 300 respondents were sampled randomly for the purpose of this analysis. This sample was considered adequate for testing the propositions stated earlier in the background of the study. For purposes of sample validation, individual question analysis were copared with the robust KARF survey, and there was a striking consistency in the findings.

2.3. Data collection methodology

A semi structured questionnaire was used to gather all pertinent information. All data was collected through interviews, that also permitted clarification of unclear questions.

2.4. Analysis

All the obtained data was electronically captured through scanning, and quantitative analysis done using SPSS. The data was scrutinised for both systematic and variability error.

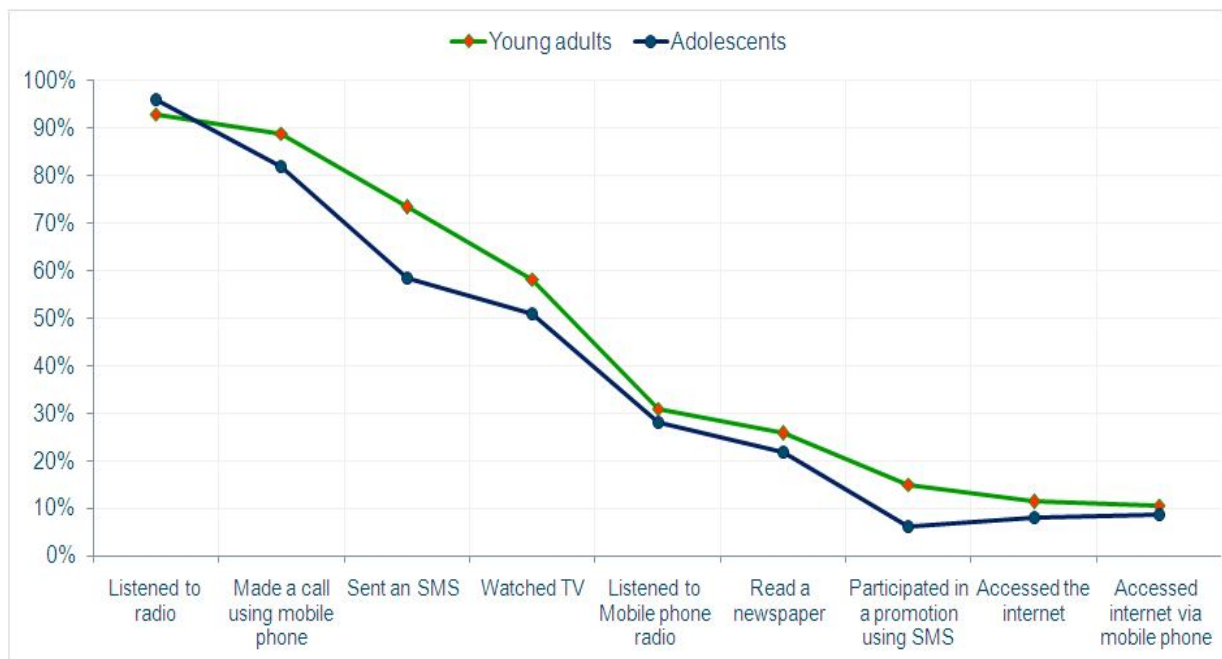
Analysed data was tabulated and also displayed using tables and charts.

Chapter Three: Summary of Findings.

3.1 media consumption

Popular belief had that adolescents were more media techy and savvy. Contrary to this, the study found out adolescents only outshine young adults in radio listenership. In all other media activities, young adults were more active.

Figure 3: Media consumed in the last 7 days



Base: Adolescents: 152, Young adults : 151

The above trend can be explained by the settled nature of young adults compared to adolescents, and that an emotional connection to the various media, aspects which adolescents are still grappling with. In support of this, Susan Gigli (2010), a leading media analyst at InterMedia, asserts that there is no clear consensus on what comprises quality media for young people because their interests are not settled.

3.2. Clothes and fashion

From the table below, adolescents have a higher likelihood of wearing certain types of clothing. The imaginary audience concept of adolescent intellectual development is considered a great influencer of what adolescents wear. This is further strengthened by peer pressure, a build-up to gratify their emotional needs.

Figure 4: clothing worn in the last six months

| Type of clothing | Adolescents | Young adults |
|------------------------|-------------|--------------|
| Boots | 44% | 50% |
| Leather jacket | 43% | 56% |
| Coloured jeans | 36% | 90% |
| Shirt dress | 34% | 0% |
| Skinny jeans | 32% | 0% |
| Tights | 26% | 50% |
| Skinny trousers | 18% | 75% |
| Gladiator shoes | 11% | 13% |
| Sweatshirt/Hoodies | 11% | 66% |
| Coloured tights | 10% | 0% |
| African print clothing | 10% | 63% |
| Ballet flats | 9% | 45% |
| Leggings | 9% | 56% |
| Supras/Hightops | 8% | 73% |
| Skater shoes | 8% | 42% |
| Boyfriend jacket | 8% | 49% |
| Jumpsuits | 4% | 57% |
| Moccasin shoes | 1% | 21% |

Base: Adolescents: 152, Young adults : 151

The theme of decency among young adults emerges from the trend above – which is a culmination of their intellectual maturity. On the contrary, skin tights, which are

still talked about in hushed tones are a preserve of adolescents, who are out seeking for attention!

It is apparently known that tight jeans and skimpy dressing is an aspect of pop culture. A quote from Camille Paglia, Professor and Cultural critic at Yale University² is perhaps a be-fitting description of pop culture: *"Popular Culture is the new Babylon, into which so much art and intellect now flows, it is our Imperial Theater, Supreme Temple of the Western Eye. We live in the age of idols. The pagan past, never dead, flames again in our mystic hierarchies of stardom."*

Popular culture is expressed in fashion, celebrities, media and music

To complement the above, adolescents outshine young adults in accessories that stand out – as seen in the figure below:

Figure 5: Personal accessories purchased in the last three months

| Total | Adolescents | Young adults |
|-------------------|-------------|--------------|
| Watch | 61% | 25% |
| Necklace/s | 45% | 23% |
| Earrings | 33% | 28% |
| Waist belt | 33% | 60% |
| Tie | 26% | 22% |
| A Neck Scarf | 26% | 15% |
| Ring | 18% | 26% |
| Bracelet/s | 16% | 18% |
| Wrist bands | 11% | 12% |
| Sunglasses | 5% | 11% |
| Wrist Cuff | 2% | 9% |
| Braces/Suspenders | 1% | 0% |
| Satchel | 0% | 5% |
| Tote/shopper bag | 0% | 2% |

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Camille_Paglia

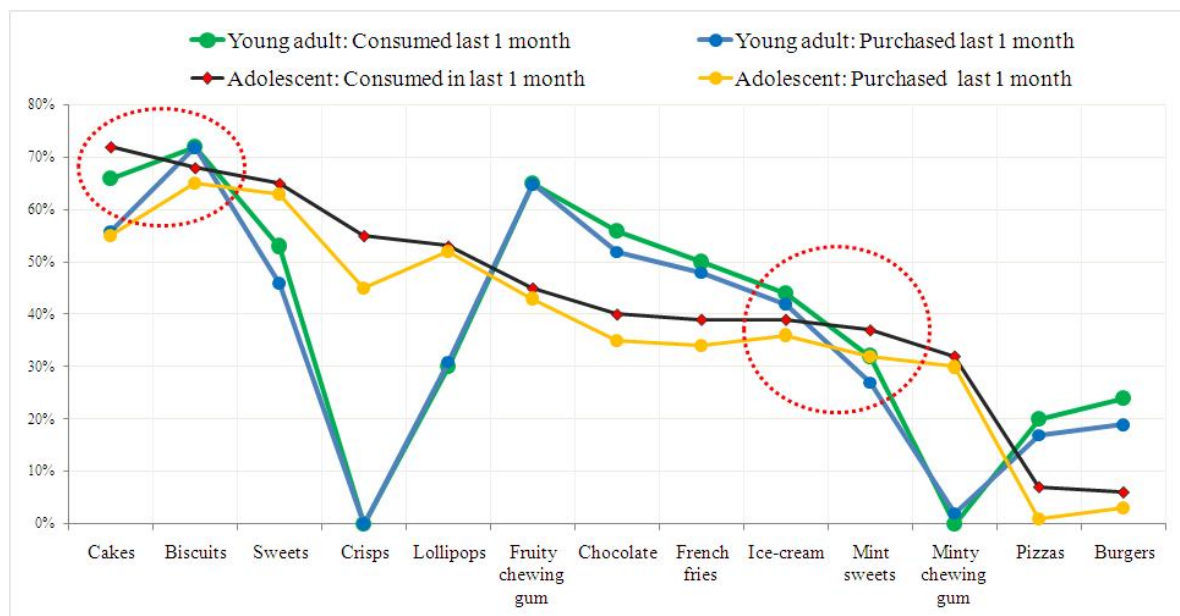
Base: Adolescents: 152, Young adults : 151

Adolescents have a higher incidence of purchase of accessories that are trendy, and which give them sense of importance. Adolescence geocentricism is seen to play again. The act of idealizing a best friend allows the adolescent to resume self evaluation and once again feel complete.

3.3. Snacks, foods and beverages

Perhaps the clearest differentiation between adolescents and young adults is achieved in the preference for various snacks and foods that they spend on as seen in the chart below:

Figure 6: Snacks consumed / purchased in the last one month



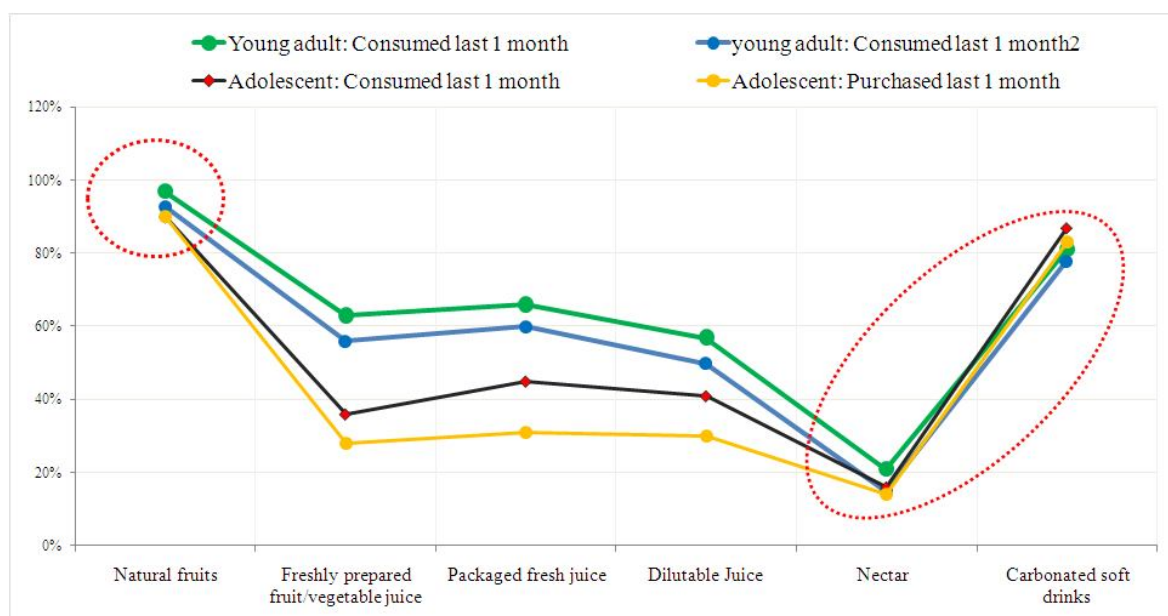
Base: Adolescents: 152, Young adults : 151

Whereas a common ground is shared on cakes, biscuits, ice cream and mint flavoured sweets (probably for air freshening), adolescents stand out in consumption of sweets, crisps and lollipops. On the other hand, adolescents stand out in chocolates, French fries and fruity chewing gum. It is important to note that there is a minimal difference between consumption and purchase among adolescents.

Although pseudo-stupidity may be the young adults' explanation why adolescents are fixated to sweets, crisps and lollipops, student's cultures and the effects of peer pressure seem to cement the preference for these products.

But perhaps the most critical evidence that intellectual development is key to driver to consumption behaviour is seen in beverage consumption as shown in the chart below:

Figure 7: Fruits / non-alcoholic beverages consumption



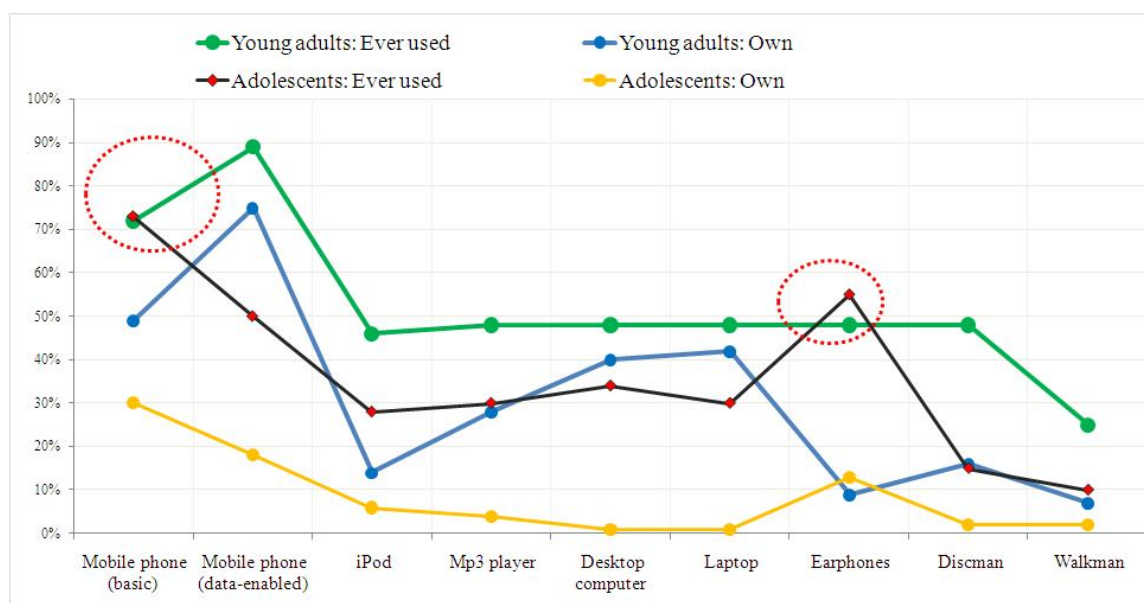
Base: Adolescents: 152, Young adults : 151

It is common place knowledge that freshly prepared juices are much healthier than carbonated soft drinks. From the chart below, adolescents' consumption of freshly prepared juice is lower compared to young adults, and that of carbonated soft drinks is higher than young adults. This can be explained by the level of intellectual development of young adults, which justifies their preference for healthier beverages

3.4. Technology use

Adolescents are rumoured to be the most tech generation that is living. However this study refuted this rumour. Usage of a basic mobile phone seems to be the only equaliser. The young adults are well above in usage of Ipods, computers and even pocket music systems!

Figure 8: technology use



Base: Adolescents: 152, Young adults : 151

The chart above seems to pronounce young adults as the trend-setters in technology.

Chapter Four: Summary, Conclusions and Recommendations

4.1. Summary

This study has established that intellectual and emotional differences play between adolescents and young adults in their consumption behaviour of various product categories. Such differences exist in media, clothing, foods and snacks and technology. Whereas popular belief has it that adolescents outshine young adults in consumption of products in these categories, the contrary is true.

Young adults are therefore more stable brand adopters than adolescents, and this is attributed to their more stable intellectual and emotional maturity.

4.2. Conclusions and recommendations

Whereas the adolescents are still a very important demography in marketing, they are lesser reliable compared to young adults. Moreover, adolescents look at themselves as ‘almost there’ in relation to young adults. Specific product campaigns can have more effect when targeted to young adults, because there will be definitely a trickle effect to the adolescent bracket.

Young adults need recognition as trendsetters in product / brand adoption.

It would be important to further this study by looking at specific intellectual and emotional milestones through lifespan development and their relationship with brand saliency measures.

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